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ABSTRACT

Recent research indicates that problems in the transition from school to employment are frequent among students with learning disabilities, particularly those in rural areas. While a systematic approach to transition appears to be beneficial, the best method for implementing such an approach is still in question. One hundred seventeen special education teachers in rural schools in Montana, Utah, Wyoming, and Idaho were randomly selected to receive a mail survey; 76 responded (a 65% response rate). The research was conducted to examine teacher training related to transition and the nature of transition services offered by the teachers' schools. Respondents were primarily resource room teachers in elementary or secondary schools; over 60 percent had more than 5 years of teaching experience. Over half indicated that their college education had contained no vocational transition coursework, and 36 percent had received no inservice training on transition. Transition planning was initiated prior to age 15 at 41 percent of schools and prior to age 10 at 17 percent. However, 28 percent of respondents indicated that transition planning was not applicable to their students, and 25 percent thought that long-range or short-term goals were not applicable. Teachers felt that the five most important transitional planning issues were teaching social skills, teaching job skills, matching skills to the job, parent involvement, and case management. (SV)

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Presenter: Glen L. McCuller
Co-Presenter: Cary Ann McSweyn
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Stephen C. Moore

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Transition for Students with Learning Disabilities in Four Rocky Mountain States

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Transition for Students with Learning Disabilities in Four Rocky Mountain States

The transition from school to the community has taken on increasing importance for students receiving special education services in our schools. Early work in the area of transition has concentrated on students with severe disabilities (e.g., Kelker & Hagen, 1986; McDonnell & Hardman, 1985). Few would disagree that the transition from school to the community is a critical factor for students with severe disabilities; however, researchers are beginning to recognize that the transition process is equally critical for students with milder disabilities, including learning disabilities (Cobb & Hasazi, 1987; Szymanski & Danek, 1985).

Historically, students with learning disabilities have received preparation for adult life by taking school courses in vocational education (Klein, Moses, & Altman, 1988; Okolo & Sitlington, 1986; White, 1985). When these students leave the school system, they move into services provided by the Vocational Rehabilitation system in each state, where services are mandated to be time-limited (Agran & Moore, 1987; Szysmanski & Danek, 1985). In order to meet the time limit nature of Vocational Rehabilitation services, exiting students are referred to higher education programs or to sheltered workshops. However, recent research indicates that individuals with learning disabilities continue to experience problems in transitioning to employment (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985). These problems are particularly true of students with disabilities who have attended school in rural communities throughout the country (Kelker & Hagen, 1986; Porterfield, 1989). Porterfield discussed the difficulties experienced by individuals with disabilities when moving from school to more independent living in the community, services available decrease. The experiences described by Porterfield are similar to those experienced in rural communities across the country.

One method used to address these problems experienced by students with learning disabilities in the transition from school to work is the implementation of systematic transition plans (Cobb & Hasazi, 1987; Tindall, 1983). The transition planning process allows schools to systematically prepare students with disabilities for community life by prescribing specific coursework and establishing linkages with adult services prior to leaving the school system.

While the systematic approach to transition implied by specific transition plans for each student with disabilities has been beneficial, questions still remain unanswered as to how the process is best implemented (White, 1985). For example, some researchers are beginning to question the efficacy of transition planning beginning in high school instead of at an earlier stage of students' school experience (Gillet, 1988; Moore, Agran, & McSweyn, 1990). For example, Rusch and Phelps (1987) indicated that transition activities typically started in the last two years of high school. Moore et al. advocated for establishing transition plans early in each student's school experience in order to systematically build career education components into each educational program. Indeed, they recommended that career exploration and linkages between academic programs and vocational programs begin in the elementary grades.

In order to assess the degree to which special educators in rural school districts were implementing transitional programs for their students with learning disabilities, we surveyed teachers in four states; Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. The results of this survey are reported in this article.

Methods

Sample

Randomly selected teachers in rural school districts from four Rocky Mountain states (Mountana, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming) were participants in this investigation. For this study, rural communities were defined as those with less than 10,000 citizens. Survey instruments were mailed to a total of 117 special education teachers identified by teacher lists generated from Departments of Education in the four states. Instruments were sent to 30 teachers in Montana, 21 teachers in Utah, 31 in Wyoming, and 35 teachers in Idaho. Approximately 48% of the teachers returned the survey instrument after the initial mailing; consequently, we sent a second mailing to the nonresponding teachers. The second mailing resulted in an additional return rate of 57%. However, the second mailing went out at approximately the end of the school term in the spring. We believed that this limited the return rate, so we sent a third mailing after school reconvened in the fall. Following the third mailing, we obtained responses from 76 teachers (approximately 65%).

Instrument

The survey instrument was devised by the third author. It consisted of 25 questions, the first 15 of which were used to identify demographic, educational and training information (including training in transition issues) from the responding teachers. The next eight questions concerned specific transition services provided by the teachers and/or their schools. Specifically, this section asked respondents to provide information on (a) the age at which transition planning was initiated for students with learning disabilities, (b) the participants in the transition planning process, (c) the skills, jopbs, job requirements, and/or support services assessed, (d) the types of goals and objectives identified, and (e) the professional who had primary responsibility for the transition plan. Finally, the last two questions asked the respondents to judge the importance of several attributes of transition. All questions required a simple tally response, except the last question which required teachers to rank order the five most important transition planning issues.

Interrater Reliability

Approximately 25% of the survey forms were tallied independently by two different people. Totals were compared and the number of agreements was divided by the number of agreements and the number of disagreements. This dividend was then multiplied by 100 to give a percentage of interrater reliability. Interrater reliability was computed to be 98%.

Results

The teachers in this study were primarily resource room teachers in both elementary and secondary schools (See Table 1). Several teachers responding to this question reported teaching in both elementary and secondary classrooms, and several reported teaching both in resource and self-contained classrooms. Forty-six respondents reported having Bachelors degrees and 22 reported having Masters degrees. Two respondents, both special education administrators, reported doctoral level degrees, with the remaining reporting "Other" levels of education. Only two respondents reported one year or less experience, nine reported 1-3 years, 11 reported 3-5 years, and 51 teachers reported more than five years teaching experience.

Table 1 Teacher Placement by State.

Current Placement	Elementary Resource	Secondary Resource	Elementary Self-Contain	Secondary Self-Contain
Idaho	8	11	3	1
Wyoming	6	7		2
Montana	7	3	2	3
Utah	6	2	3	2
TOTALS	27	23	8	8

Of the teachers responding to the question pertaining to inservice training on transition, 25 (36%) had received no training at all. On the question pertaining to college courses on transition taken, 42 (57%) of the respondents reporting indicated that their college education contained no vocational transition coursework.

Table 2 displays the ages at which transition planning generally starts in the schools from which each teacher reported. Twenty (28%) of the teachers responding to this question indicated that transition planning was not applicable to their students, and four teachers (6%) indicated that they did not know the age at which transition planning was initiated. However, 29 teachers (41%) indicated that transition planning was initiated prior to age 15, and 12 teachers (17%) indicated that the transition plan was initiated before 10 years of age.

Table 2 Age at Which Transition Planning is Implemented, by State.

Age	<10	10-12	13-14	15-16	17-18	>18	NA	Don't Know
Idaho	2	1	7	4	2		4	3
Wyoming	3	1	5	4			6	1
Montana	2	1	1	5	3		4	1
Utah	5		1				6	
TOTAL	12	3	14	13	5		20	5

When we asked teachers to identify the long range goals of transitional planning for students with learning disabilities, 25% of the teachers responding indicated that long range transitional goals were not applicable

for their programs. However, 18% of the teachers indicated that skills training was an important long range goal, 16% indicated that the level of independence the student would obtain on the job was important, and 11% indicated that training students to do several different jobs was an important long range goal.

Similarly, when asked to identify short term transitional objectives, 25% of the teachers responding to this question reported that short term transitional objectives were not applicable to their programs. Ninteen percent indicated that skills training was important, 11% indicated that ongoing supports on the job was important, and 13% indicated that the level of independence attained from a job was an important short term goal. Thirty-six percent of the teachers indicated that the secondary resource or self-contained teacher should be responsible for implementing the transitional planning goals and objectives. It is important to note that only one teacher in the sample indicated that a formal, district-wide transition planning form was in use.

Finally, Table 3 displays the mean ratings of the relative importance of factors effecting transition planning. Most of the responding teachers rated each item relatively highly on a scale ranging from "1=unimportant" to "5=always important." The totals for all categories were at least 4.0, although individual states rated some categories (e.g., Transportation and Career Education) lower than a 4.0 mean rating.

Table 3 Mean Ratings of Importance of Transitional Issues by State.

	Idaho	Wyoming	Montana	Utah	Total
Transportation	4.4	3.9	3.8	4.6	4.1
Case Management	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.6	4.2
Teaching Job Skills	4.0	4.4	4.6	4.7	4.6
Teaching Social Skills	4.8	4.6	4.7	4.9	4.6
Assessing Available Jobs	4.4	3.9	4.3	4.4	4.2
Matching Skills to the Job	4.7	4.1	4.5	4.7	4.5
Interagency Cooperation	4.4	4.0	4.6	4.4	4.3
Career Education	4.5	3.8	4.1	3.9	4.0
Involvement of Parents	4.9	4.5	4.7	4.7	4.6
Involvement of Employers	4.5	4.6	4.6	4.7	4.6
Teaching Access to Community Services	4.4	4.4	4.5	4.6	4.4
Teaching Job Seeking Skills	4.5	4.0	4.3	4.7	4.3

Although teachers in the four states believed all of the above factors to be important to transitional planning as evidenced by the high mean ratings, when forced to place in rank order the five most important transitional planning issues, priorities became apparent. When the data were analyzed, the five most important issues were listed as (1) teaching social skills, (2) teaching job skills, (3) matching skills to the job, (4) involvement of parents, and (5) case management. The least important issues were career education, access to community services and transportation.

Discussion and Conclusions

Several things become clear from the results of this investigation. First, rural special education teachers clearly have not received adequate training in vocational transition issues at either the preservice or inservice levels. Fully 25% of the sample used in this investigation had received no training in transitional issues. This can possibly be explained by the fact that nearly 70% of the teachers had more than five years of experience. When these teachers were in preservice programs, vocational transition may not have been a major focus of their educational programs. However, just as likely is the idea that teacher preparation programs still do not emphasize transitional issues. Rather, they concentrate exclusively on academic subject matter.

Results indicating that rural special education teachers are beginning transition programs at an early age are encouraging. A substantial number of rural special education programs are starting to initiate transitional planning when students are 10 years of age or younger. This is considerably younger than the ages reported by Moore et al. (1990) and Rusch and Phelps (1987). Unfortunately, 20% of the teachers in the current study reported that transition issues were not applicable to their programs. Clearly, more must be done to insure that all teachers are aware of the difficulties students with learning disabilities have in transitioning from the school system.

Even though some of the rural special education teachers were reporting that transitional issues were not applicable to their programs for students with learning disabilities, as a group they responded positively to the identification of issues deemed important to the transition process. However, when they were asked to rank order these issues, there were clearly some issues less important than others. For example, transportation was seen as one of the least important issues. Nonetheless, it would seem appropriate that transportation be placed high on the least of important issues, because the lack of transportation is perhaps the most difficult problem to overcome in rural communities (Kelker & Hagen, 1986).

Overall, we were encouraged by the state of vocational transition planning in rural schools in the Rocky Mountain region. We believe progress is being made. However, we also believe that more must be done in order to insure that students with learning disabilities have appropriate, systematic assistance in making the transition from school to work.

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